

With this Ring, I thee transform

Traditionalists accuse Richard Jones of being touched. But, he tells Andrew Clements, Wagner demands insanity

WITH its blue, pneumatic Rhinemaidens, its Fricka in a tattered wedding dress stepping out of an old jalopy, and a final conflagration created out of a wall of cardboard boxes, few British opera productions of recent times have aroused so much controversy as the Royal Opera's Ring cycle, directed by Richard Jones and designed by Nigel Lowery, with lighting by Pat Collins. Unwielded over the past two seasons, it consistently polarised critics as much as audiences: some dismissed it as a trivialising, cheapie assault upon one of the supreme masterpieces of the repertoire, while others welcomed it as a breath of fresh air in which Wagner's oppressive grandeur and bombast finally got their comeuppance.

The four operas generated moments of such power and directness that it will be impossible to view many scenes again without remembering the way Jones and Lowery dealt with them. In *Götterdämmerung*, for instance, the humiliation of Brinnhilde, forced to parade across the banquet tables of the Gibichung Hall with her head in a paper bag, was as disquieting and appalling a moment as I've ever seen in an opera production.

The Ring has returned to the Royal Opera House in London: *Das Rheingold* began the first of three complete cycles to be presented over the next month.

When Jones was invited to direct a new Ring at Covent Garden, he and Lowery had already staged the first two operas in the cycle, *Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, for Scottish Opera, though that project had ground to a halt for lack of money. Jones was surprised to receive the approach, and the brief from the Royal Opera House was to begin

again from scratch rather than re-work what had been done in Glasgow, but there is, he agrees, a theatrical style shared between the two productions.

The point of reference is the Theatre of the Absurd. "We thought this vocabulary was particularly appropriate for *The Ring* for a number of reasons. One was that it presented a meaningless universe, and a universe in which people can consistently reinvent themselves for the purposes of their plans; another was that the Theatre of the Absurd seems to investigate folly quite rigorously. I've often found myself having to say what *The Ring* is about, and I always said 'folly'. In the Ring folly leads to nothing but despair, destruction and death."

Over "acres of meetings" the team thrashed out their approach. The treatment that emerged was uncompromisingly bleak and unflinching. "The work is philosophically and politically very strong. There is a duty in 1996 not to present *The Ring* in a romantic context, so that it can be honoured as the warning it is. It has to avoid a romantic visual and acting style, but I also want people to find it moving and stirring; I want them to see the characters' behaviour objectively. If they then choose to care about them, that's their problem."

It is a view of *The Ring*, certainly, that contains few if any sympathetic characters, and one in which almost all the characters, certainly all the gods, are either tainted by Wotan's desperate megalomania or instruments of it. Even Brinnhilde, conventionally the heroine of the cycle, cannot escape censure: "You feel for her because she is the victim of someone else's plan, but she also has an agenda which she wishes to put upon the world and which is as deluded or as much folly as her father's. By the end of *Siegfried*, her plan for a world built upon love is very strong and it could be construed as ricocheting back on her."

It is fear of death, fear of the abyss, Jones thinks, that drives Wotan. "It's about a desire or a need



Opern of the Absurd... Jane Henschel as a bearded Fricka in *Das Rheingold*, which kicked off the Ring cycle. PHOTOGRAPH: HELENETTA BUTLER

for permanence. There is a letter from Wagner to the poet Rilke in which he says that lovelessness is fear of death, and that seemed to come up regularly in our initial meetings about this production."

Over the past century *The Ring* has provoked more philosophical and political debate about its meaning and possible interpretations than perhaps any other work of art. Jones has immersed himself in that literature over the past decade — "After this is all over, I'm looking forward to putting it all in a big box and hiding it under the stairs" — but he has been careful not to commit himself to any one reading.

There is, inevitably, a political and moral dimension — "I'd like to think that if the audience see someone wandering around on a table with a

paper bag over her head, it might enter their heads that it isn't the way to organise yourself socially... I don't think there is anything redeeming about *The Ring*. Brinnhilde's death is a warning, it's an example, but only in the sense that somebody sees that it is better to go than to stay in a life that is so degraded or corrupted."

"I think she thinks it's better to make an exit; if you think that is a redemption, that's okay. My view of her immolation scene is that it is a decision to commit suicide — she is aware that she has failed to create a world built upon love."

The construction of *The Ring*, Jones believes, precludes easy answers. "The text is very nihilistic, but the music is very affirmative. I think *The Ring* is profoundly ambiguous."

Maestro in the making

IT IS MORE than 20 years since the Leeds Piano Competition produced a winner who went on to establish himself in the very highest rank of international performers, writes Andrew Clements. That was the Russian Dmitri Alexeev, who walked away with the first prize in 1975.

Since then, the winners have tended to be decent rather than outstanding. But this year's winner holds the promise of making the transition from worthy winner to outstanding one.

The success of Ilya Itin, aged 29, a Russian resident in New York, was thoroughly uncontroversial, after a final in which the standard of the six performances was very high.

There is no doubt that Itin was the outstanding performer, with a wonderful range of colour, a truly imaginative way with texture and phrasing, and a supreme technical command. He will make his London debut this month.

The jury — a cosmopolitan lot, though short of a pianist of the highest international stature — takes into account performances in earlier rounds. That presumably coloured their choice for the second prize, for the Italian Roberto Cominati's efficient but unremarkable performance of Rachmaninov's Second Concerto. The Prokofiev Third Concerto from the Yugoslav Aleksandar Madzar was by contrast dashing and dynamic, and oozing with personality.

The performers received vivid support from Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. They led off the finals with an electrifying, effervescent account of the Paganini Rhapsody with the Chinese Sa Chen, aged 17.

If some of her ideas were a bit approximate, there was no doubting her talent. Her placing — fourth — was a recognition of potential rather than present stature.

Itin was a class above them all.

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TELEVISION Nancy Banks-Smith
DOST up and try not to look so lumpy. "I had... possibly still have... an image of hatred among the lumpy intelligentsia who read the Guardian," said Peter Lilley. It's an awful job running the Department of Social Security. You have to sneak in the back door as old age pensioners, Guardian readers to a man, abuse you at the front. The System (BBC 2), a five-part series on the social services, seems to have had unusual access. Peter Lilley was rehearsing his conference speech before Jeffrey Archer (famous author and wordsmith), who frankly found his performance short on passion. In this Mr Lilley could have taken lessons from Mr Green. Even Mark Antony could have taken lessons from Mr Green. It didn't occur to Mark Antony to mention his mother. Most of the faces pressed against the DSS windows were weak and

defeated. Not Mr Green's. He said his mother was in hospital and he wanted the price of a ticket to Liverpool. The clerk asked which hospital. At this Mr Green stepped on the gas: "You're talking about my mother?" (The clerk recoiled at his low blow.) "I ain't got the information you need. A lousy £15.50 for me travel fare to get down there! What do I do when I walk out this door now?" he asked passionately. "Go and rob a car to get down to Liverpool? Cos I need to. I've come down to you to try and help me. That's what you're for, aren't you? You are supposed to be there when people are desperate and in crisis? Well, I'm in crisis! My mother's ill and you won't even give me the fare to get down there! You want stupid evidence first. I ain't got it!" He gestured in the general direction of Liverpool. "What would you do if it was your mother? If you had to get nearly 100 miles to Liverpool?" Saying which, he left in a marked manner, missing the standing ovation. Everyone agreed he had earned the

money. The idea of earning it any other way did not seem to have occurred to him. I don't believe in leaving it to relatives, said the millionaire Armand Hammer. Clearly a man of steel or, to be precise, oil. Inheritance (Cutting Edge Channel 4) was the cautionary tale of Sybil Dreda-Owen, who made darn sure the relatives didn't get it. Sybil cultivated wealthy, elderly gentlemen. She was usually described as a little, old lady, sometimes a dotty, little, old lady, or, for variety, a batty, little, old lady. Until, that is, she surfaced with a will that confounded the lot. Her most entertaining coup was claiming a slice of Dr Bodkin Adams' fortune. Bodkin Adams was extremely good with old ladies, who appreciated his assiduous sympathy. He was accused (and acquitted) of murdering a wealthy patient, who had left him money in her will. Sybil was the only old lady to turn the tables and get money out of Bodkin Adams. She clawed £53,000

out of his estate, claiming they were engaged. Some may find her claim that the novelist LP Hartley, a homosexual, had fathered her daughter, even wittier. Walter Joslin was a former civil servant living in what Hampstead calls a cottage. Marie Antoinette would have called it a cottage too. It is an exquisite little period house, white like royal icing, a short stroll from where Keats heard a nightingale sing. Sybil's gentlemen always died rich. Bodkin Adams, Hartley and Joslin left around half a million each. Joslin willed his estate jointly to his church and his nephew. Then he met Sybil. A precise, educated and intelligent man, who referred to Sybil and her daughter as The Batty Two. Joslin inexplicably signed shoddy draw-up wills in their favour, witnessed by stop assistants. Hampstead is a very rich village. Andrew Scott-Stokes, one of the witnesses, threw a vivid sidelight on village life. "It was always a bit of a bind having to phone people up for her and stuff, but in Hampstead it's not unusual to do this for people. A

little dotty old lady who needs help and — I don't know if I should say this — she said she'd see I was all right in the end if I helped her out." Sybil airily promised him Walter's cottage. He said "You hear stories in Hampstead of people looking after someone else's budget and becoming multi-millionaires. You always hope you're going to get that one." One man had the foresight to bring a woman friend along when Sybil invited him to tea. This evidently threw a spanner in the works. "Henry", the spanner recorded frostily in her diary that night, "took tea, I did not." If Sybil had been found, you feel she might have been happy to perform. A chatty, colourful, look-at-me, little woman. Scott-Stokes clasped his hands and did a falsetto impression of Sybil, twittering inconspicuously about her father the bishop. Her father the what? The moral of this, Monica, is, if you have a rich uncle, don't leave it blind having to phone people up for her and stuff, but in Hampstead it's not unusual to do this for people. A

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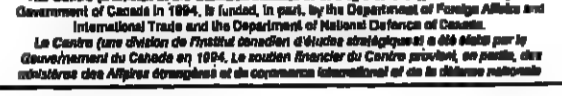
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East meets West... Endo in his writing was frequently compared to Graham Greene. PHOTO: ROBIN LAWRENCE

Words across the chasm

Shusaku Endo

NO JAPANESE writer has been quite so well known abroad, as Shusaku Endo, who has died aged 73. He was highly regarded for his novels, short stories and plays, which brought him honours, doctorates and numerous literary awards, and led him to be spoken of frequently as a likely Nobel Prize winner.

eral of his short stories. When his parents eventually divorced, he returned to Japan with his mother. Soon afterwards she converted to Christianity, and it was through her influence and that of the devout aunt with whom they shared a home that Endo became a Roman Catholic in 1957.

This sense of being an outsider, acquired through his conversion, was a crucial factor in Endo's development as a novelist and in his ambivalent attitude towards his own country. "I had been baptised as a young boy and was marked out by his peers as a follower of a foreign creed," he once wrote. "I was never physically attacked, but I spent my student days as the object of contempt. For me, Japan (then at war with China) had become a loathsome country, and I agonised daily over how I could bring myself to fight for Japan when the day came."

It was this mountain, or gulf, between East and West, the conflict between Endo's Japanese Buddhist sensibilities and the tradition of Hellenistic Christianity inherited through baptism, that provides the central theme of much of his work, not least his masterpiece Silence (1967). This was first brought to the attention of readers in Britain by Graham Greene, a writer whom Endo admired and to whom he was often compared.

Endo saw it as one of his tasks as a writer to find "somewhere within the great symphony of Catholicism", to quote from his translator William Johnston's introduction to Silence, "a strain that fits the Japanese tradition and touches the Japanese heart". He took up the subject again in such later novels as The Samurai and Deep River, in some of his intensely personal short stories, as well as in his play The Golden Country. He even wrote A Life Of Jesus to show his countrymen that the Christian tradition might not be quite as alien as they imagined.

Endo tried to find a strain of Catholicism that touched the Japanese heart

After four years in France, Endo returned to Japan, and in 1954 won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for his first novel, The White Man. The Sea And Poison, about a Japanese doctor forced to take part in the vivisection of prisoners-of-war, appeared in 1957.

mysteries of Japan. In 1989 I spent a month there at his invitation and to experienced at first hand his distinctive humour and generosity. The novelist and his friend Kenzo Kagi met me at Narita airport and I quickly realised Endo could go nowhere in his own country without being recognised, complimented and photographed. No Western writer would be so revered.

His manner was usually jolly and informal, reassuring and relaxed; he was much amused by cultural incongruities: the gaucheness of the Westerner coping with Japanese formality and vice versa. Though well versed in European literature, he never mastered much English, but retained some fluency in French.

There was nothing conventional about the tour of Japan that Endo arranged for me. It was typical of him that on my second night in Tokyo he should give a dinner party in a private room at the very same Chinese restaurant at which his fictional hero, Soguro, meets his mistress.

Endo's 1988 novel, Scandal, "Do you recognise these surroundings?" he asked with a mischievous smile. "I thought it might make good copy for you."

In order to see authentic aspects of Tokyo, he recommended a visit to the docks and the fish market; on the southern island of Kyushu I was shown the places where the 16th-century Jesuit missionaries (the subjects of his novel Silence) died for their faith; in Kyoto, he suggested certain temples and shrines, but I was to be sure to eat at the country's best restaurant and visit "le quartier rouge", he said with a twinkle. "Ask for Mr Ohtake and mention my name."

It was a name that guaranteed special treatment throughout Japan, and one that commanded respect and honour wherever he went.

Susan Cameron

Shusaku Endo, writer, born March 27, 1923; died September 29, 1988

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INTERNATIONAL NEWS 7

Afghan victors put mercy to flight

The fanatical Taliban will impose stability through Islamic justice, writes David Loyn in Kabul

THE rotting bodies of Mohammed Najibullah, the former president, his brother, and two of his aides still hung in Kabul at the weekend, a humiliation and a warning. Every building along the road to the Afghan capital bears the scars of heavy fighting. Lorry containers are used as warehouses, shops and houses lie burst open by shellfire on the sand. It is like an archaeological site layered with the evidence of almost two decades of war.



Taliban fighters celebrate with the bodies of Mohammed Najibullah, the former Afghan president, and Shahpur Ahmadzai, right, his brother

Even the Taliban forces have been surprised by the rapid pace of the retreat. Among Kabul's middle class there was panic. Traffic clogged the roads out of the city to the north as civil servants and the rich fled the Taliban advance. We were forced to carry a group of Taliban fighters into town; their lorry had broken down. They were country boys, awestruck at their command of the capital, and exhausted after a two-day battle that had brought them control of the country.

At last, Taliban fighters approached the United Nations compound and asked to see the man they called the "special guest". Najibullah had lived under UN protection since the collapse of his communist regime four years ago. A Turkish UN official refused access to the guerrillas, but after an argument they forced their way in and seized Najibullah and his brother, Shahpur Ahmadzai.

The bodies were left to hang from the vantage point. Traffic police came to work as usual and stood at the side, directing traffic and pedestrians around the grim spectacle. Later, two of Najibullah's senior colleagues — his bodyguard, General Jafar, and his aide, Tokhi — joined him hanging by the roundabout.

The public executions have horrified many residents of Kabul. The excesses of the mujahedin leaders who drove the communists from power had mellowed public opinion about Najibullah. Out of the hearing of Taliban soldiers, many people expressed their dismay.

there were very few women on the streets. Otherwise, Kabul has been little affected by the change of government. Previous takeovers have been marked by looting. But for the most part, Taliban has kept its hands off. One Taliban soldier challenged me to put a \$5 note into a pile of abandoned ammunition, claiming that it would still be there in a week.

The Taliban spiritual leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar Akhund, says he will not take any political position in the new government. He has announced that his movement now represents Afghanistan and is seeking recognition from the outside world. Islamic countries are dividing on predictable lines.

The number two in the movement, Mullah Mohammed Rabbani, is the most powerful figure in the new six-man government. Last week Mullah Rabbani outlined his movement's plans for a pure Islamic state governed by laws which will prevent women working or receiving education, and where television and any image of the human body are banned. Nine men have already had their hands cut off for stealing in Taliban areas.

The most visible sign of confidence that Taliban will bring stable government comes from Kabul's money-changers. The rate of the afghan to the dollar, 15,000 a week ago, is now less than 8,000. Every night and morning since Taliban arrived there has been heavy shellfire from the mountains north of here. But trade has quickly resumed.

Even as Taliban's men advanced through the dark suburbs of Kabul, the first lorriesloads of grapes and melons began to head out for the Pakistani border.

In a sign that there might be further bloodshed, Taliban forces moved into position on Monday to confront the Uzbek militia of General Rashid Dostan, a key warlord. However, there are signs that the parties may make a deal. — The Observer

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More than just a puppet of Moscow

OBITUARY Mohammed Najibullah

MOHAMMED Najibullah, who has been murdered in Kabul aged 49, joins a long line of Afghan rulers who have died violently. Yet in a society that has known two decades of turbulence he may be remembered for the relative stability of his six years in power.

Najibullah was often simplistically described as a Soviet puppet or as a mass murderer because of his period running the Khad, the secret police. But he became a shrewd and intelligent politician who kept the Afghan capital, Kabul, free of war and won the respect of its inhabitants, especially after it fell prey to the jealousies and in-fighting of the mujahedin.

Najibullah's overthrow. For Najibullah the route was through the secular People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the only one of the three campus Marxist groups which became the best organised, and it was no surprise when it mounted a successful coup in April 1978.

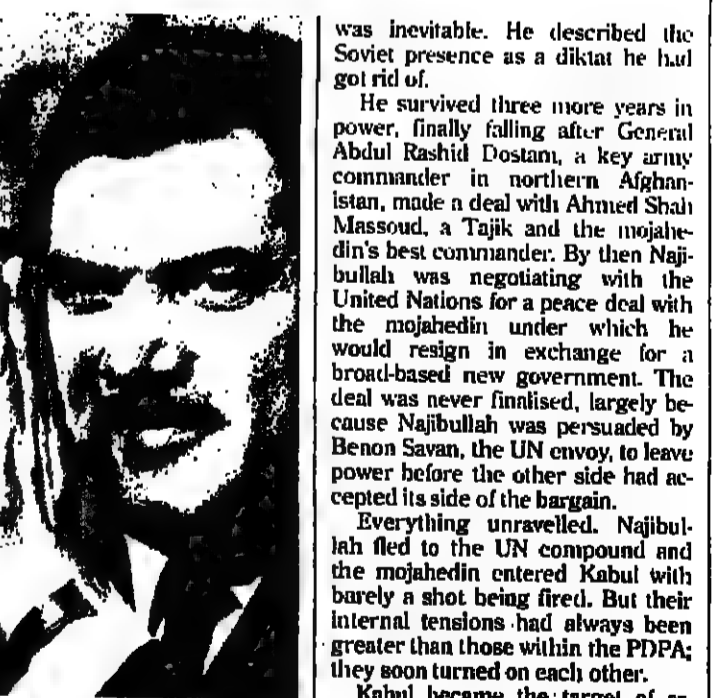
In power party divisions grew, based on ideology, the pace of the revolution, and clan and personality issues. Najibullah was a member of the Parcham wing, which fell out with the impatient, radicalising Khalq faction under Hafizullah Amin as it pushed village literacy drives and sweeping agricultural reform with little sensitivity to peasant conservatism. Coupled with the minimal role the regime gave Islam, its policies launched two decades of civil war. Najibullah fell out with the Khalq faction and went into exile until the December 1979 Soviet invasion. The Red Army's arrival reinforced the view that the Kabul regime was an alien, atheist implant, giving new impetus to the civil war and turning it into a classic cold war struggle. The United States and Pakistan's military government took the mujahedin side, based in the refugee camps of Peshawar and the North-west Frontier Province.

Najibullah ran the secret police, a job that involved cruelty and killing. The regime controlled the cities and could pass along the main roads. The mujahedin moved at will in the mountains south and east of Kabul but never seized a major town.

For five years the war was stalemated, then Mr Gorbachev decided withdrawal was the best option. The KGB thought that, as Pashtun, Najibullah would have a better chance of managing the retreat and keeping a pro-Moscow regime in power than Babrak Karmal, who had been installed when the tanks first arrived.

Thus did Moscow back Najibullah's 1986 takeover. He gradually reversed the reforms of 1978 and sought to broaden the regime's base by re-emphasising Islamic and nationalist symbols. It was an uphill struggle because of the easy propaganda target of Soviet atheism. But by February 1989, when the last Soviet troops pulled out, Najibullah had done a remarkable job of consolidating support, helped partly by the mujahedin's fanatical posturing, which scared Kabul's urban middle class.

The US and most of the diplomatic community did not understand Najibullah's support base. "Once the Soviet protectors are gone, the regime's early demise will be inevitable," Robert Peck, the US negotiator, told Congress. Mr Gorbachev also thought Najibullah was doomed. Unusually, it was the KGB chief,



Najibullah kept the Afghan capital, Kabul, free of war

Vladimir Kryuchkov, and foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, who forged an alliance behind Najibullah in the pro-withdrawal period, believing it would leave a poor signal if the Soviet Union abandoned its friends. At home Najibullah played the nationalist card, making a virtue of necessity once the Soviet withdrawal

Jonathan Steele
Mohammed Najibullah, politician, born 1947; died September 27, 1988

